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ABSTRACT

Rhetorical analysis, which is distinctly different from literary analysis in its emphasis on technique and style, as opposed to appreciation and self-improvement, can and should be used to help students write better. One means of introducing rhetorical analysis into writing courses would be through the research paper, which in many courses is a poorly conceived project anyway, confusing both student and teacher alike. Properly conceived, the research paper project should allow students to choose specific topics, ones that interest them, within clearly defined task frameworks. These task frameworks should do three things: (1) outline the kind of writing students are supposed to do; (2) clearly describe the general goals of such writing; and (3) explain its relevance. Rhetorical criticism solves so many of the problems of the traditional research paper because it encourages students to think about how arguments are formed, how rhetoric can influence society and culture, and how reality can be constructed through interpretations. One such project would ask students, first, to select a historical figure and a persuasive text attributed to that person and, second, to do research on the occasion that surrounded the composition, presentation and reception of the persuasive text. Their first paper on the project would summarize what they learned from this research; the second paper would conduct a rhetorical analysis of the text itself. (TB)

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Researching and Writing About Argument

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What is the value of rhetorical criticism to composition studies? A principal difference between composition and literary studies is that the latter is oriented around two projects: the appreciation of great works and pedagogy that helps others appreciate these works. Composition, however, is not concerned with such appreciation; it is concerned with the teaching of writing. Writing in the disciplines, writing with computers, empirical studies of writers and writing processes, theories of communication, historical studies of pedagogy and theory--if we have a single mission, it is teaching writing. The problem faced by rhetorical critics who want to be part of the composition community is that what we do does not seem to be part of that mission. Rhetorical critics, after all, seem to be engaged in a very literary activity: an analysis of texts, often literary ones, that does not appear to have any application to the theory or pedagogy of writing. In fact, one might argue that rhetorical criticism is nothing more than another kind of literary appreciation, a description and evaluation of texts that is concerned with the valorization of a new self-justifying canon: the great works of oratory. Why then should composition bother with rhetorical criticism? How does it serve the field?

I would argue that rhetorical criticism serves the field in at least two important ways. The first has been recognized since ancient times. One teaches students to study and sometimes imitate the work of other rhetors to teach them to recognize and practice specific techniques.

This is different than examining essays in readers. The modern tradition of using readers grew, to a great extent, out of the belle lettres

tradition in rhetoric and out of the fact that until recently the majority of composition teachers either had been or wished to be teachers of literature, or were adjuncts who were taking orders from teachers of literature. The purpose of using such readers was to promote or provoke discussion of ideas and to teach literary appreciation. While such discussion should be one goal of rhetorical education, the difference is that in the literature-oriented composition classroom the rhetorical, the social, and the political were often devalorized in favor of the private, the poetic, and a search for universals of human experience. Students were taught to study the text for its own sake or for the sake of the contemplation of ideas or because it made them better people. Generally, the examination of texts was not oriented towards teaching students about rhetorical technique, how rhetoric can be deceptive, how we live in a world where reality is not simply experienced but constructed in part according to the cultural codes we use, or how to use rhetoric as a tool for citizenship.[1]

Rhetorical analysis can be used to help students write better. It can be used to help students identify, think about, and imitate techniques and styles that they can then employ or avoid in their own work. The study and imitation of models is recommended in the rhetorics of both Cicero and Quintilian (see Corbett, "Imitation" 243-45 for a more complete discussion). It has been recommended by various modern rhetorical theorists, including D'Angelo ("Imitation and Style"), Gibson, and, as one might expect, Corbett (Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student 448-49). (A full discussion of

[1] Berlin, James A. Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987.

this issue appears in Gary Tate's Teaching Composition 83-130.[2]) There is even some empirical evidence that it is pedagogy that works. The Hillocks meta-analysis suggests that a models-based approach to teaching writing, while not as effective as some other approaches (invention-based approaches are ranked as the best), can lead to significant pedagogical results (214-17).[3] All this suggests that the close reading and imitation of rhetorical texts, especially if combined with other pedagogical approaches such as invention and peer evaluation, can help students involved in writing similar texts.

There are other important reasons for studying rhetorical texts in the composition classroom. Rhetoric is a principal tool of citizenship in a democratic society. It allows citizens not only to engage in discourse with their own arguments, but to understand the rhetoric used by others. Halloran and Berlin have both encouraged composition specialists to teach rhetoric as training in public discourse for the involved citizen. Similar arguments have been made by speech specialists like James R. Andrews, Sonja Foss, and Bruce E. Gronbeck.[4] One may go even one step further to discuss how such rhetoric

[2] Corbett, Edward P. J. "The Theory and Practice of Imitation in Classical Rhetoric." CCC 22 (1971): 243-50; Corbett, Edward P. J. Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student. New York: Oxford UP, 1965; Gibson, Walker. "An Exercise in Prose Style." In Rhetoric: Theories for Application. Ed., Robert M. Gorrell. Champaign, IL: NCTE, 1967: 99-106; D'Angelo, Frank. "Imitation and Style." CCC 24 (1973): 283-90; Corbett, Edward P. J. "Approaches to the Study of Style." In Teaching Composition: Twelve Bibliographic Essays. Ed., Gary Tate. Fort Worth: Texas Christian UP, 1987: 83-130.

[3] Hillocks, George, Jr. Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communications Skills, 1986.

[4] Berlin, James A. "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Classroom." College English 50 (1988): 477-94; Halloran, S. Michael. "Rhetoric in the American College Curriculum: The Decline of Public Discourse." Pre/Text 3 (1982): 245-69; Andrews, James R. "'Wise Skepticism': On the Education of a Young Critic." Communication Education 38 (1989): 178-83; Gronbeck, Bruce E. "Rhetorical Criticism in the Liberal Arts Curriculum." Communication Education 38 (1989): 184-90; Foss, Sonja K. "Rhetorical Criticism as the Asking of

permeates our society, that even the most seemingly innocent of texts (news reports by trusted reporters, scientific articles, westerns, etc.) not only employ rhetoric to communicate their stories and facts, but also involve more subtle arguments (often not recognized by their authors) about the nature of reality, ethics, society, sexuality, and so on. Training students to be critical readers, to be able to recognize and engage such implicit arguments, has been recommended by proponents of cultural studies and social-epistemic rhetoric like Berlin, and by speech specialists such as Frederick Antczak (who suggests that we teach rhetoric to show students how texts invite audiences to adopt certain subjectivities).[5]

In short, if we want our students to be engaged in the democratic process of the nation and active participants in its culture--instead of simply being passive consumers of texts and genres--in short, if we want them to be citizens as well as professionals, then we should be teaching them about the rhetoric that envelops them throughout their lives. We should be trying to show them how rhetoric works, not only how to create their own texts. Once again, I believe that doing so also helps them write better.

So how do we do this?

One method is to turn the traditional research paper into a rhetorical criticism unit. There are good reasons for doing this. One of the most important is that traditional approaches to the research paper are frequently pedagogical nightmares. Most of us are familiar with the problems. Students are bored and confused by the research paper. They do not know why they are writing the paper in the first place and so they often have no idea of how to manage the material. One cause may be that neither students nor teachers receive much guidance about the reasons for writing research papers. The result is that often teachers end up teaching research papers merely for the sake of teaching the skills involved--showing students how to do library research,

Questions." Communication Education 38 (1989): 191-96

[5] Antczak, Frederick J. "Teaching Rhetoric and Teaching Morality: Some Problems and Possibilities of Ethical Criticism." RSQ (1989): 15-22.

cite sources, and imitate the current incarnation of academic writing--rather than having them learn these skills as part of a clearly defined writing project that gives the work direction and meaning.

Things are not totally hopeless. Textbooks such as Four Worlds of Writing[6] clearly indicate a growing interest in the use of writing as inquiry, numerous studies have examined the successful application of theme-oriented research writing, and James Berlin championed the use of cultural critique in the writing classroom. At the same time, a number of the most popular textbooks continue to rely on limited and limiting approaches. Two recent composition textbooks illustrate the nature of the problem. Trimmer's Writing with a Purpose--probably the most popular writing textbook in the country--divides the research paper into the tasks of "survey" and "argument" (372), and then offers little more in the way of guidance beyond such general suggestions as telling the student to assume their audience is curious and uncommitted. The St. Martin's Guide to Writing takes a different approach. The chapter on the research paper is simply a list of research strategies. The actual writing assignments are presented in chapters on activities like "Remembering People," "Explaining Causes," "Proposing Solutions," and "Analyzing Literature." The difference between personal essays and research papers both oriented around such tasks seems to be that one relies on memory and opinion while the other relies on documented sources.[7] To be fair, this approach is probably more useful than the one presented in Writing With a Purpose, as each chapter examines a particular writing task in detail. At the same time, I am concerned about the problems that may be created when teachers conflate Kinneavian aims of writing in this manner. Among other problems, combining such different writing tasks as personal essays and academic reports under such general headings might confuse students who are

[6] Lauer, Janice M. et al. Four Worlds of Writing. 3rd Edition. New York: Harper Collins, 1991.

[7] Trimmer, Joseph F. Writing With a Purpose. 10th Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992; Axelrod, Rise B. and Charles R. Cooper. The St. Martin's Guide to Writing. New York: St. Martin's P., 1991.

trying to figure out what styles, sources, and modes of development are most appropriate for the different assignments. In short, it requires that teachers take particular care to discuss the differences between the numerous genres that have been lumped together in a single chapter.

I believe that the writing projects that work best are those that allow students to choose specific topics, ones that interest them, within clearly defined task frameworks. These task frameworks should do three things: 1) outline the kind of writing they are supposed to do (which may but does not have to include a specific format for the paper), 2) clearly describe the general goals of such writing, and 3) explain why working on such papers is connected both to the larger goals of the course and to their college studies. This is one reason why I believe rhetorical criticism solves many of the problems associated with the traditional research paper. It invites students to analyze and perhaps imitate the work of professional writers. It encourages students to think about how arguments are formed, how rhetoric can influence our society and our culture, how we construct reality through our interpretations--which are rhetorical in nature--rather than simply experience it, and to articulate what they have discovered in their analyses. It offers students a clearly defined task where they can choose individual topics related to their own interests, a task that is also related to the larger goals of a course in rhetoric and composition.

While numerous twentieth century composition theorists have drawn extensively from classical rhetoric, there is not much work on the use of rhetorical criticism in the composition classroom. Most of the articles that have appeared on the subject are designed for speech specialists, and for courses that emphasize rhetorical criticism as a discipline in its own right and not as part of a course in composition. One particular source worth mentioning is Martin Medhurt's article in volume 38 of Communication Education, which was published as part of a special issue on teaching rhetorical

criticism, because it describes a pedagogy similar to the research paper assignment I will be discussing in a moment.[6] To my knowledge, very few similar discussions exist.

The basic method I employed had two steps. First, I had students select a historical figure and a persuasive text attributed to that person. They wrote a short summary of the text, concluding with their own personal reaction to it. Students then did research on the occasion that surrounded the composition, presentation, and reception of the persuasive text and wrote a paper that summarized what they had learned from this research. Students were given almost total freedom in their selection of a historical figure; the only restriction was that their subject had to have produced at least one rhetorical text and that there had to be a sufficient number of credible sources for them to do reliable research. This first paper would conclude with a discussion of how the situation demanded a rhetorical response. The goal of this paper, in addition to providing training in such research skills as finding sources, taking notes, citing accurately, and so on, was to show students how rhetoric is situated.

Once the first paper was written, I asked students to write an analysis of the rhetorical text itself. I broke the research paper into two separate units because I believed the project would be less confusing to students if they only had to work on one task at a time, doing research and summary first, then critical analysis. I now believe that I may have underestimated my students and I intend in the future to simply teach rhetorical criticism as a single, long research paper.

[6] Medhurst, Martin J. "Rhetorical Criticism: Forensic Communication in the Written Mode." Communication Education 38 (1989): 205-13.

Students used a fairly traditional neo-Aristotelian methodology, as described by Sonja Foss in Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice.[9] Students concentrated on an explication of the ethical, rational, and emotional appeals used in the text. How does the writer or orator gain the trust of her audience? What claims does she make and what kinds of reasons or evidence does she offer? How does she appeal to the emotions or values of her audience? In some cases, I allowed students examining longer works to consider general themes and approaches rather than requiring that they produce a comprehensive discussion of individual appeals. The goals of this paper are pretty obvious. I wanted to give students an opportunity to explore how arguments made in response to a particular situation are constructed, to teach them to think critically about argument, particularly the kinds of argument used in public debate. While I cannot imagine that one assignment, even a long one, will magically transform students into expert readers of rhetoric, I hope that combining the traditional research paper with this kind of examination of argument would at least give them a good introduction to this kind of activity.

This method appears to meet all the requirements of a traditional research paper. First, it requires students to learn two essential skills: they must familiarize themselves with their college library, locating and examining documents. Second, it demands close reading and analytical thought rather than mere summary. Third, it provides students with an opportunity to practice the academic style that will be required of them in other college courses and, sometimes, in the workplace.

[9] Foss, Sonja. Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland P, 1989.

This version of rhetorical criticism appears to have three additional advantages over traditional research papers. First, because it is such an uncommon assignment, plagiarism is difficult. Students may copy sources, but few will be able to find complete papers of the sort that show up in fraternity files that they can pass off as their own. Second, the method outlined here has a fairly straightforward format, making it easier for many students to organize their thoughts and their analyses. To put it another way, the research task is very clearly defined; students may not know what they are going to say about the historical figure and the text they have chosen to study, but they do know the kind of questions they are supposed to ask of their sources. Finally, because the range of possible subjects is fairly wide, most students can find a topic that is personally interesting to them. I recommended political leaders because I thought it would be easier for students to find useful sources on them, but students were free to choose other figures. The most popular choices in the classes where I experimented with rhetorical criticism were American Presidents, including John F. Kennedy, F. D. R., George Bush, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Jackson--to my surprise, a number of students considered the seventh President--, and Richard M. Nixon. Presidential hopeful William Jennings Bryant also made an appearance, as did British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Religious figures were also popular. Jesus of Nazareth, Martin Luther, and American preacher Jonathan Edwards were all examined. Other students considered civil rights leaders Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, and environmentalist Rachel Carson. One of the best papers considered the rhetorical structure of Darwin's Origin of Species.

In general, my students responded positively to rhetorical criticism. I circulated a questionnaire to students in the classes where I had assigned rhetorical criticism as the research project. Because of the small number of students involved (roughly 100) and the lack of randomization, this questionnaire has limited empirical validity, but I think the responses may suggest some general trends, and offer direction for future research. For the most part, students said that they liked rhetorical criticism as much or more than traditional research papers. They felt that they learned as much or more than they would have learned from a traditional research project. Some students reported difficulty with the method, but one student remarked that she thought it was because of her lack of familiarity with rhetorical criticism rather than it being any harder than a traditional research paper. Some students mentioned that they disliked the project, but most of these added that in general they were not especially fond of any research writing. In short, the response to rhetorical criticism appears, at least in this initial examination, to be positive. Most students seem to have learned as much from it as they would from traditional methods; some believe they learned more and wrote better using rhetorical criticism; few, if any, appear to have been harmed by it.

In conclusion, I would not pretend, and I certainly do not desire, that this paper is the last word on either the research paper or rhetorical criticism in the composition classroom; rather, I hope very much that it is the first of many words on the intersections of these topics. We have a lot of issues here that need to be looked into. What are the variables of writing instruction connected with rhetorical criticism? What areas of planning, writing, or revision are improved by an emphasis on rhetorical criticism?

What kind of improvement occurs? How does teaching rhetorical criticism compare with teaching other kinds of writing? What textbooks and teaching methods work best with this emphasis? To what extent is rhetorical criticism suited to certain kinds of students or teachers? What elements of cultural criticism are useful to this kind of approach? How does teaching rhetorical criticism affect the political awareness of students? My own hypotheses are that students will learn at least as much from rhetorical criticism as from the conventional research paper, but these projects are more likely to encourage them to write and to read critically. Rhetorical criticism will make students more aware of the rhetoric that surrounds them in their everyday lives and will make them feel more confident about their ability to take part in the political process of this country and to engage in discourse on the issues that concern them and affect our world. Thank you.